

7-27-2018

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Mental Health Assistance Programs at a Suburban Chicago Fire Department

Christina Spoons

Walden University, Christina.spoons2@waldenu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/symposium2018>

Recommended Citation

Spoons, Christina, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Mental Health Assistance Programs at a Suburban Chicago Fire Department" (2018). *2018 Program & Posters*. 6.

<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/symposium2018/6>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Research Symposium at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2018 Program & Posters by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Mental Health Assistance Programs at a Suburban Chicago Fire Department

Christina Spoons, Ph.D.

Problem

The increase in suicide rates among fire personnel has been an ongoing challenge for jurisdictions. One survey of more than 4,000 first responders found that 6.6 percent had attempted suicide, which is more than 10 times the rate in the general population (Venteicher, 2017). Between 2008-2009, the Chicago Fire Department experienced seven active duty suicides within 18 months (DeGryse, 2015). There is a significant amount of literature addressing suicide, discussing symptoms, behaviors to be aware of, and demographics of those who have committed suicide. Despite increased attention to the topic, the number of firefighter suicides in the United States has steadily increased since recording of such statistics began (DeGryse, 2015).

This study examined the effectiveness of programs available to personnel at a suburban Chicago fire department to help them deal with stressful situations. Critical incident stress debriefings (CISD) and the employee assistance program were the programs evaluated because most of the strategies discussed in literature regarding stress management and suicide prevention happen to be housed within the CISD and employee assistance programs in many fire departments.

This mixed-methods study combined purposeful sampling of key informants regarding the use of CISD sessions after traumatic incidents and employee assistance program, and an online survey open to all fire personnel on the department.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of programs available to personnel at a suburban Chicago fire department to help them deal with stressful situations. Critical incident stress debriefings (CISD) and the employee assistance program were included in this evaluation.

Research Questions

What were participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of critical incident stress debriefings?

What were participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the employee assistance program?

Theory or Framework

Herbert Simon's theory of bounded rationality was examined to see whether it holds true in attempting to implement CISDs in the fire department studied. Bounded rationality is the idea that in decision-making, rationality of individuals is limited by the information they have, the cognitive limitations of their minds, and the finite amount of time they have to make a decision (Simon, 1972). In this case, the CISD model was based on information known at the time, which may or may not have been sufficient to develop an effective program to deal with the stress and trauma fire personnel can experience.

Significance

It is considered best practice at the fire department studied to hold CISDs and offer assistance through the employee assistance program. With the rising suicide rate among fire personnel, it is essential to determine whether the programs currently available for personnel are effective.

Relevant Scholarship

Much has been written about

- **Increasing suicide rates among fire personnel** (Boffa, et al, 2017; Lamplugh, 2015; Henderson, et al.; Venteicher, 2017),
- **Critical incident stress debriefings** (Barboza, 2005; Davis, 2013; Jacobs, Horne-Moyer, & Jones, 2004; Mitchell, 2006; Volkman, 2010),
- **Mental health services for fire personnel** (Carpenter, et al., 2015; Gunderson, et al., 2014; Hom, Stanley, Ringer, & Joiner, 2016), and
- **Suicide prevention** (Finney, et al., 2015; Gulliver, et al., 2016; Jahnke, et al., 2015; Moffitt, Bostock, & Cave, 2014).

Social Change Implications

The implications of this study reach beyond the Chicago area and can benefit the fire service as a whole. Chicago is not the only region seeing an increase in suicide among fire personnel. Fire personnel in any city or region globally can experience significant stress from the job. In too many instances, personnel are not getting the assistance they feel they need.

Participants and Procedures

This mixed-methods study combined the following:

- Purposeful sampling and interviewing of five key informants regarding the use of CISD sessions after traumatic incidents and employee assistance program, and
- An online, anonymous SurveyMonkey survey open to all 93 members of the fire department.

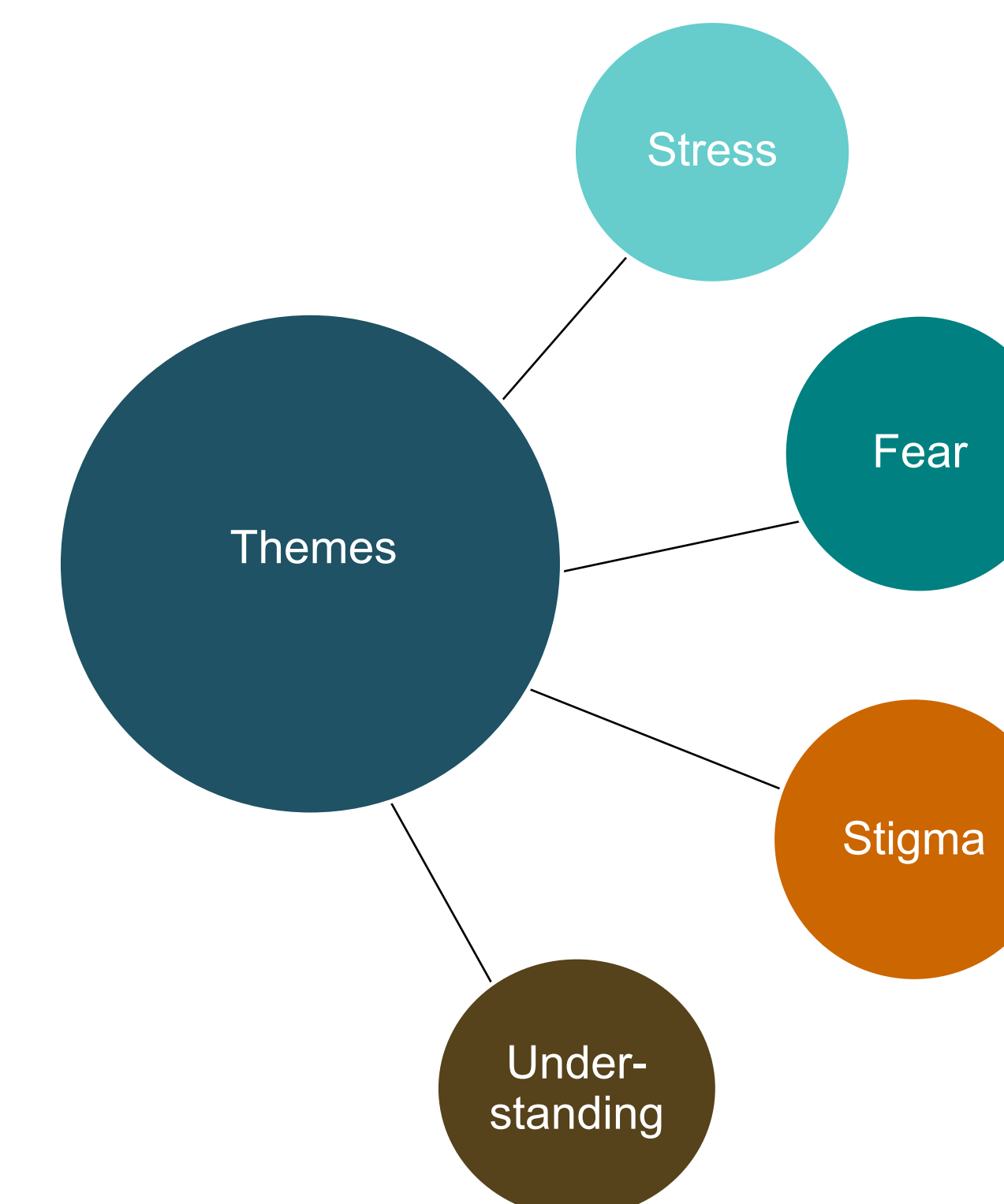
Analysis

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with key informants were analyzed both inductively and through coded outlines to look for patterns regarding attitudes about the programs available to personnel and the effectiveness of those programs.

Identification of themes.

Qualitative data were coded using NVivo, quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS.

Integration of qualitative and quantitative data



Limitations

Limitations include time and open and honest responses from participants. The small sample may not be representative of all US fire and emergency services departments. This study is specific to one fire department in the Chicago area, but lessons learned may be applied in other jurisdictions

Findings

Perceptions of CISD

- Of the 27.7% of respondents who have participated in a CISD, just 4.8% found it helpful.
- Some respondents reported not being comfortable discussing their feelings/perceptions/difficulties in front of other co-workers.
- Some participants reported feeling pressured to share feelings in front of other co-workers during the debriefing.

Perceptions of Employee Assistance Program

- Of the 10.8% of respondents who have sought out the employee assistance program, 7.2% felt it was helpful for them.
- Some expressed concern about a stigma regarding seeking assistance and were fearful others would find out.

Overall Perceptions

- 72.3% of participants would like to see other programs to help them deal with stress and mental health issues.
- Some arson investigators, who are required to be certified to carry a weapon as part of their job, reported concern that seeking assistance could jeopardize their employment.

Interpretation

This study elicited the opinions of fire personnel to see what they do or do not find helpful regarding assistance programs currently available, as well as some of the reasons behind those opinions. The findings of this study suggest the available programs are beneficial to a small number of participants, but that a majority of participants do not find them helpful. This leaves a gap between what management is providing for personnel and what personnel really need to manage stressful situations.

Recommendations

Results of this study suggest that alternative options should be explored to the CISD and the currently available assistance programs.